



Raxworthy, Julian R. (2003) *Modern landscape*. Architectural Review Australia, 85. p. 16.

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Landscape is a perennial source of conceptual material for most creative disciplines, and, arguably, everything else, but it is always irritating to landscape architects how it is seized on by architects when their own canon is boring them or their language of form is getting a bit straight. What is frustrating is that while landscape architecture attempts to come to terms with factors, systems and nuances of situations that may result in form, there is a tendency in architecture to make icons of generic 'natural' archetypes. This is not to say that landscape architecture has yet developed a strong formal language that engages with these nuances, just that the struggle with them is at its root, and this struggle with specificity in the face of generic-ness is a noble one. In the face of this, to see architecture describe a 'new' and 'innovative' interest in landscape on the basis of a simplistic 'nature / culture' division, for example, or an interest in 'the ground' seems like a diversion: surely there must be innovation in a real, articulate and sophisticated understanding of the architectural canon.

These thoughts come to the fore in reviewing *Modern Landscape* by Michael Spens, the latest addition to the Phaidon quarto series dedicated to 'styles', which has included (the much more sophisticated) 'Contemporary' and 'Gothic'. Divided into sections on the basis of a range of paradigms that Spens suggests characterise such a 'modern' landscape approach, including Parkland, Architecture as Landscape, Garden Landscapes and Urban Interventions, what one is left with is a slightly better

photographed selection of projects that any person with an interest in landscape in the last 10 years would have already seen. Examining the selection, regardless of category, one is struck by a blatant legibility in formal terms, ranging from clear topographical abstraction and pattern, to muscular external structure. In other words, landscapes of easy architectural identification and description. However, in such description, as a landscape architect, one cannot help feeling that precisely the qualities that draw attention to the landscape are lost in this process of muscular interpretation.

In the introduction to the volume, and the subsequent essays for each section, an argument seems to be put that suggests a crisis in the landscape, and more particularly in landscape architecture, that needs architectural resolution. A potted history of landscape architecture, which seems to mirror Stephen Krog's arguments of the early eighties that landscape architecture had yet to come to terms with the modern (since which time voluminous study of that period has been undertaken), ends with a picture of Charles Jencks' paisley mounds and lakes, with a caption of 'A return to theory in the landscape', via an inevitable discussion of relationships with nature in the work of the Land Artists. This representation of theory and design seems to suggest that theory is an appliqué on form, and that ambiguity in these terms represents conceptual bereft-ness. This is a position that could only have validity in an architectural world after Eissenman, Liebeskind and the like, where to read something is to then see it, graphically. A void is a void after all.

In describing landscape architecture as the poor brother of architecture, Spens makes some clear errors that would be forgivable if it were not for the fact that they dispute his assertion of unsophistication of landscape architecture; in incorrectly describing Alexandre Chemetoff as the founder of the Versailles School of Landscape Architecture, Spens passes over Michel Corajoud and thereby a rich body of research and speculation that begins to seamlessly play across the culture/nature divide that is really boring in landscape, creating an innovative space between archaeology and ecology. That said, the inclusion of Bernard Lassus' rest area at Nîmes, though much publicised elsewhere, begins to explore this space.

To his credit, Spens does discuss landscape projects in their own right, rather than simply architecture projects that have a sectional relationship to the ground, the focus of much of the recent discussion of 'Earth-building' and 'Ground-scrapers', which should probably be more concerned by membranes and water-proofing technology generally. Ultimately, Quaderns and some Dutch stuff still provides the only seamless and useful discussion of an unpretentious space between architecture and landscape. Everything has a relationship to the ground, to the landscape, even if you're not talking about it. What this discussion needs is sophistication and context, and some self-consciousness, rather than bland and self-evident typologies that reduce whole disciplines to catch-cry's. Surely it's all culture anyway.